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Light and Darkness in the Epiphanies of Henry James' Heroines

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Long after the age of Enlightenment illumed Europe, light continues to symbolize the attainment of internal illumination. In keeping with such a dominant cultural and literary conceit, Henry James illuminates moments of recognition with images of light, an effect which achieves literary parallelism in his novels *Washington Square* and *The Portrait of a Lady*. Both texts feature heroines who live in worlds that esteem the qualities of brightness and who experience realizations revealed by the presence — and even the absence — of light. Yet, by revealing that light and brightness symbolize more than knowledge, James renders nuanced and unconventional epiphanies that emphasize the abnormality of the two modern women whose stories resist literary convention.

Henry James establishes the America of *Washington Square* as a land literally and figuratively illuminated by the light of knowledge. Introducing Dr. Sloper, he writes that,

> [the healing art] is touched by the light of science — a merit appreciated in a community in which the love of knowledge has not always been accompanied by leisure and opportunity. (*Washington* 138)

Already the reader understands that the society in which Dr. Sloper practices medicine links light with intelligence. The concept of science can be used almost interchangeably with knowledge and intelligence, as the word "science" derives from the Latin root *sciare* — to know. In fact, the inclusion of the term "the light of science" reveals that light itself represents knowledge. As light is a visual phenomenon, an energy which illuminates human vision, light allows us to perceive and know the world. In this opening gesture, James establishes a world familiar to the one that he and his contemporary readers inhabit. In both reality and this fictional realm, knowledge is likened to light in a symbolic wordplay on the concept of enlightenment.

James soon clarifies, however, that *Washington Square*'s America is not merely enlightened, but is populated by those who value enlightenment. The text's narrator explains that Dr. Sloper's New York social circle was "fond of boasting that it possessed the 'brightest' doctor in the country" (*Washington* 138). James emphasizes the descriptor "brightest" with in-text quotations, highlighting the word itself and suggesting that it is directly quoted from the mouths of those who praise him. It is the only word distinguished in such a way, and this emphasis attracts the reader's attention. Already the reader wonders, how does the narrator know that this specific word applies to Sloper's

reputation, whereas all other words — whether praise, gossip, or hearsay — are spoken indirectly? Perhaps this specific quality of brightness is what resonates within Dr. Sloper's mind; perhaps it is the word with which he describes himself. However, the narrator quickly answers the reader's question, clarifying that this comment is "attributed to him by the popular voice" (138). Clearly this quality of "brightness" refers to his intelligence, as the narrator remarks that he is known to be "witty" and a "clever man" (138). But, regardless of this accolade's source, James intends the reader to initially identify Dr. Sloper with his being "bright."

Dr. Sloper himself primarily understands the concept of "bright[ness]" to reference mental acumen. He views himself as a man of Enlightenment era interests, being both a "philosopher" (*Washington* 138) and a doctor and believes his intelligence to be innate. Considering himself "an observer," or so the narrator belies, "to be bright was so natural him, and (as the popular voice said) came so easily" (138). But again, it is the "popular voice" that heralds his praises. Since the quality of brightness defines his self-perception, Dr. Sloper assigns value to others, specifically his daughter, based on the brightness which he perceives within them. However, the concept of brightness is nuanced, and to understand his intents in using the term first requires understanding the term's various meanings.

While Dr. Sloper considers the quality of brightness to refer to his "witty" intelligence and "clever mind," the word itself possesses a range of different connotations both within the text and throughout the English language. The *Oxford English Dictionary* acknowledges the term "brightness" as describing "the quality of being intelligent and quick-witted," but also connotes status and popularity, defining another usage as "glory, renown, [and] illustriousness" (OED). These are qualities that James' introduction reveals Sloper to have. Yet the fact that it is the "popular voice that considers Dr. Sloper to be the "brightest" suggests that brightness is a quality bestowed on account of one's popularity and popular approval rather than knowledge. In fact, James specifies that Dr. Sloper is not so much smart as perceived to be smart. His reputation as a talented and intelligent doctor, one who always leaves behind "an inscrutable prescription," dazzles New York society (*Washington* 137). Additionally, Dr. Sloper's brightness may refer to another aspect of his life, his financial success, or what the *Oxford English Dictionary* defines as, "[h]appiness, success, or prosperity, esp[ecially] as a likely future prospect" (OED). His marriage to the beautiful Catherine Harrington guaranteed him lifelong "prosperity and happiness" through the "solid dowry" (138) which she brought into the union. The narrator, as if quoting from the *Dictionary*'s definition of "brightness," explains that Dr. Sloper "found the path to prosperity very soft to his tread" (138). Dr. Sloper is "bright" not merely because of his intelligence, but because of his "prosperity" — his wealth, as well as his success, and the admiration he evokes in others. Perhaps while commentating on Dr. Sloper, James uses the

vague word "bright" in a superficial sense, emphasizing the precedence of societal approval above all else, even knowledge.

Clearly, Dr. Sloper desires that his daughter possesses all possible connotations of "brightness" to better reflect his own brilliance to the public. Although he was "never dazzled by his sister's intellectual luster," he still desires that she — Mrs. Penniman — tutor Catherine to "try and make a clever woman of her" (*Washington* 142, 143). Mrs. Penniman, though not "brilliant" like his deceased wife, shines with a certain societal brightness, perhaps derived from the familial bond that connects her to her brother (142). While Catherine appears to be likeable, albeit extremely insecure, she lives "very much afraid" (145) of her father. He is as much a father as he is a patriarchal god, and she marvels at his "great faculties" and their "luminous vagueness" (147). Unfortunately, Catherine greatly disappoints her father's ambitions, as she "was extremely modest [and] had no desire to shine" (145). As such, Dr. Sloper even directly asserts that "my daughter is not brilliant" (171). Just as Dr. Sloper repeatedly compares her to her late mother's "brillian[ce]" and his reputation as society's "brightest," so too does the narrator relay that her "rigorous critics" called her a "dull, plain girl" (142, 148). One gets the sense that these "critics" are actually her father, who "almost never addressed [her] save in the ironical form" (159). He certainly praises her appearance at Ms. Almond's ball, but his commentary on her gold-fringed dress' "magnificen[ce]" reveals his joking irony (160). He fears that those observing her will see the gold of her inheritance reflected in the glimmers of her gown. Even Catherine herself discerns her father's disappointment in her lack of intelligence, acknowledging that her mother was "very, very brilliant," while lamenting that she herself "is not at all like her" (290). While the young heiress of *The Portrait of a Lady* is heralded as bright by those around her, she too suffers from the influence of controlling men, just as Catherine does.

Isabel Archer, the self-proclaimed heroine of *The Portrait of a Lady*, also lives in a world where the indeterminately vague qualities of "brightness" — intelligence, wealth, and popular approval — are valued commodities represented by light imagery. And like Catherine in *Washington Square*, Isabel is often associated with light, in *Portrait*. Even Isabel's last name "Archer" connects her with the virginal moon goddesses, Artemis in Greek mythology, and Diana in the Roman tradition, both of whom are depicted as archers. Like the moon guiding lost sailors across a dark sea, Isabel remains a source of brightness to many wandering men. When Isabel arrives at Gardencourt, "her eye lighted," before she instantly attracts the gazes of Ralph Touchett and Lord Warburton as they stroll the lawns of Gardencourt (*Portrait* 28). Certainly, her powers of attraction may have to do with her beauty and her "flame-like spirit," to which many men fly like moths. Additionally, she certainly possesses a bright mind. She is noted for her intelligence, passing for a "young woman of extraordinary profundity," and is considered to be a "prodigy of learning" (54,

53). Yet brightness is also a quality that denotes wealth and prosperity in *Portrait*, given that her inheritance also attracts men.

However, while Isabel attracts others with her bright spirit and wit, she is not all-knowing with regards to the realities of the world. In this regard, Isabel resembles Catherine. She is "seated alone with a book" in the house's office when her aunt arrives to bring promises of an exciting new life in England (*Portrait* 31). The office in which she sits, the narrator remarks,

> was the most depressed of [the house's] scenes. She had never opened the bolted door nor removed the green paper (renewed by other hands) from its side-lights; she had never assured herself that the vulgar street lay beyond. A cruel, cold rain fell heavily. (33)

Within the room, Isabel is separated from the rest of the world, which itself is darkened by "cruel, cold rain" (33). The windows are covered with paper that obscures the external light and no internal light illuminates this "depressed" room. While her eventual departure from this dark room foreshadows Isabel's escape to the lighted lawns of Gardencourt, the darkness also highlights the room's symbolic tension. Within the room exists the paradoxical presence of both darkness and intelligence. This juxtaposition reinforces the darkness of her cloistered upbringing and her need to become enlightened in the ways of the world. She sits in an office, a place of education and knowledge, yet still reads in unenlightened darkness. The knowledge that she attains in this room from the books she reads does not bring her true enlightenment. Clearly, she requires time to mature from a naive and sheltered girl who then considered the world outside to be "vulgar." But her naivete continues to trouble her throughout the novel, leading her to trust Madame Merle and marry Osmond. Specifically, it is her reliance on and belief in fairy tales that cause her to wed such a dubious man. She has been influenced by fiction all her life; for example, upon being introduced to Lord Warburton, she exclaims, "[o]h, I hoped there would be a lord; it's just like a novel!" (27). As such, she trusts that her life will resolve into a happy ending, even when marrying Osmond. Her ignorance is not lifted by traditional means, whether by books or enlightening encounters, but instead is only be lifted by the light of an epiphany.

Regardless of her intelligence, Isabel is undoubtedly a beacon of brightness, if one remembers that brightness denotes not only illumination but "[h]appiness, success, or prosperity, esp[ecially] as a likely future prospect" (OED). Indeed, it is Isabel's large inheritance that attracts the shadowy widower Gilbert Osmond, with its promise of the prosperity that he hopes to attract for himself. Not only does Osmond's middle-class status contrast with the refined brightness that Isabel offers him, he is the opposite of bright, even admitting aloud that he has "neither fortune nor fame" (*Portrait* 264). Others share this opinion as well, for Ralph Touchett finds Osmond quite in contrast to Isabel's desire to go "soaring and sailing" in life, perceiving Osmond to instead be very "small" (291). Osmond's "grave and dark" (217) house is as shadowy as he is, being "artificial, not open" (197). Every aspect of his villa and his life is a carefully constructed

artifice. Yet to Osmond, Isabel's wealth and brightness has made him "brighter" (296). He views his success in marrying her to be quite "brilliant a blaze" (295) and so promises her a successful marriage, one that will be a "long summer afternoon … with a golden haze and the shadows just lengthening," a parody of the summer day at Gardencourt when Isabel arrived to enjoy that "eternity of pleasure" (297, 17). But this promise of a pleasing medley of light and shadow resembling Gardencourt is a false one. It merely reveals that Osmond has the wealth of Gardencourt on his mind. Although he assures Isabel that he is not marrying her for her inheritance, the amber glow of her wealth completely transfixes his parasitic heart. Just as the moon reflects the brightness of the sun, so too does Osmond want Isabel, merely so that she might reflect his own intelligence and acquired affluence. He seeks in his marriage a "fanciful mind which saved one's repetitions and reflected one's thought on a polished, elegant surface" (296). To him, his wife's "intelligence" had a "decorative quality" which appealed to him merely because its brightness would help him dazzle the "world's curiosity," which he constantly sought to excite (296, 331). Just like Dr. Sloper, Osmond desires brightness, that is, the luminescent aesthetic quality that fascinates society.

During his marriage, Osmond seeks to dim Isabel's brightness until it exists merely to magnify his own ambition. Her illumination then reflects the richly ornate and baroque gilding of his tasteless extravagance. While visiting the Osmonds' villa to meet with Pansy, Edmund Rosier is captivated by Isabel's brilliance. He sees her "[f]ramed in the gilded doorway, [and] she struck our young man as the picture of a gracious lady" (*Portrait* 310). Isabel appears in black velvet, "radiantly gentle," while dazzling the party with a "luster beyond any recorded losing or rediscovering" (309). Yet this gleaming moment is but a thin golden veneer concealing Isabel's now dimmed spirit. For if she once existed in the light, she has since been darkened by Osmond's perverse influence. Ralph remarks,

> [o]f old she had been curious, now she was indifferent … what perversity had bitten her? … the free, keen girl had become quite another person; what he saw was the fine lady who was supposed to represent something. What did Isabel represent? … she represented Gilbert Osmond. (331)

Isabel now "represent[s]" Gilbert Osmond, who, like his house, reflects everything dark. While she had been "curious," "free, [and] keen," she has now become the opposite, the opposite being Gilbert Osmond. She no longer possesses her own brightness but reflects and "represents" the qualities which Osmond considers to be bright.

Similarly, Catherine mistakes the advances of a fortune seeker, Morris Townshend, for love. Her quiet epiphany occurs as she realizes that he never loved her, nor will he ever return to her. Catherine closes herself up in a room,

> [a]nd then she sat there, staring before her, while the room grew darker. She said to herself that perhaps he would come back to tell her he had not meant what he said; and she listened for his ring at the door trying to believe that

> this was probable. A long time passed, but Morris remained absent; the shadows gathered; the evening settled down on the meagre elegance of the light, clear-coloured room; the fire went out. When it had grown dark, Catherine went to the window and looked out. (*Washington* 310-311)

With the fire's sudden extinguishing so too does her hope die. Rather than being illuminated by a sudden bright light, the sudden darkness of the room prompts her to move to the window. Only after this reflection does Catherine acknowledge the reality that Townshend will not return. Prior to this moment she had trusted him unreservedly. The room, once described as "light," has grown "darker," and accumulates shadows for two reasons. First, the day is waning into evening darkness. Second, the fire, a source of illumination that is as unnatural and artificial as Catherine's trust in Townshend, has gone out. Together, the loss of these two lights causes her poetic descent into gloomy sadness. And outside the door waits Mrs. Penniman, anxious to enlighten her niece with the knowledge she garnered from her last conversation with Townshend. Viewing ignorance and sadness as darkness, she waits for her niece to confide in her, wishing that "[p]erhaps she should be able to explain certain things that now seemed dark" (314). The reader can see tradition's mark upon the scene as Mrs. Penniman believes herself to be an illuminating force. She believes that her knowledge will provide enlightenment and explain the "certain things that now seemed dark." However, Catherine has already achieved her primary epiphany, the emotional understanding that Townshend will not return, and Mrs. Penniman's revelations are merely secondary. The primary epiphany reveals itself in darkness; the unusual manner by which it occurs highlights its unconventional nature and portends the story's unhappy and similarly unconventional ending. The story concludes with Catherine neither marrying Townshend nor achieving the marital bliss expected of a woman of her era.

Just as Catherine reaches an epiphany as she sits in darkness, so too does Isabel experience a revelation during a nocturnal vigil. Isabel sits by the fire in the drawing room and reflects on her husband's words, which bring her to an "unexpected recognition" (*Portrait* 354). In order to achieve this "recognition," she first requires the illumination of physical light. When "a servant came in to attend to the fire … she bade him bring fresh candles" (354). With the presence of this new light "she saw the answer" (354), as only through light's illumination can she see the world and perceive its deeper realities. She requires this illumination because she has not yet questioned Warburton's continuing relationship with her. On pondering whether Warburton has "a susceptibility, on his part, to approval, a desire to do what would please her," Isabel realizes that she,

> had hitherto not asked herself the question, because she had not been forced; but now that it was directly presented to her she saw the answer and the answer frightened her. (354)

The firelight first reveals to her an understanding that, "[y]es, there was something — something on Warburton's part" and that "she had a definite

influence on Lord Warburton" (354). In this solitary moment, his interest in her and her persuasive power over him "frightens her" (354). This fear contrasts with the intoxicating rush of power Isabel enjoyed when Warburton first proposed to her.

But Isabel's complex epiphany occurs in two parts. Like her first epiphany in the drawing room, Isabel's second moment of "recognition" is intricately linked with light. In her first realization, Isabel requires illumination and so she asks the servant to "bring fresh candles," but her acknowledgement of the relationship between her husband and Madame Merle requires the "sudden flicker of light" that shines from a recollected memory (*Portrait* 354, 342). This metaphorical flicker occurred when Isabel had witnessed Madame Merle and Osmond in an intimate discussion, or rather in a moment of pause, in which they had the "freedom of old friends who sometimes exchange ideas without uttering them" (343). In that moment, Isabel "received an impression," as "the thing made an image, lasting only a moment, like a sudden flicker of light" (342, 343). She dismisses the image from her mind for several hours but recalls it at the end of her vigil:

> [w]hen the clock struck four she got up; she was going to bed at last, for the lamp had long since gone out and the candles burned down to their sockets. But even then she stopped again in the middle of the room and stood there gazing at a remembered vision — that of her husband and Madame Merle unconsciously and familiarly associated. (364)

In a dark room in which the "lamp had long since gone out" and "the candles burned down to their sockets," Isabel is paradoxically able to gaze at a vision (364). While the notion of seeing in darkness seems impossible and contradictory, the language describing this second epiphany suggests photography and the process of developing negatives. The epiphany arrives as if she had been startled into understanding, through the camera's flash of a "sudden flicker of light" (343). The momentary "image" that she glimpsed when seeing her husband functions as a photographic negative; only by developing the shadowy negative in a dark room can she resolve both the image and her questions. This necessary dark room is figured in the darkened drawing room. Indeed, this image is completed when she leaves the room; the image of her husband and Merle materializes after hours of sitting in solitary darkness. After seeing this image, Isabel concludes that the two had shared an intimate past and returns to the darkness to sleep. James' method of describing this moment of realization subverts the familiar trope of combined mental and physical illumination, achieving an effect akin to Catherine's moment of recognition. And like Catherine's epiphany, the manner in which the epiphany occurs is as unconventional as the epiphany itself.

As if to emphasize the role of darkness in triggering epiphanies, James concludes *The Portrait of a Lady* with an image of Isabel in darkness, a darkness in which she obtains additional epiphanies that follow moments of literal illumination. Before her final interaction with Caspar Goodwood, Isabel strolls

across the lawns of Gardencourt and walks away from the light, "under the great oaks whose shadows were long" (*Portrait* 485). James bookends the text with Gardencourt's expansive grounds, but now its lighted lawns have faded into darkness, as if rejecting its promise of that "eternity of pleasure" (17) at the story's beginning. This inversion symbolizes the reversal of fortunes that Isabel undergoes; Gardencourt's grandeur once promised her happiness, but the inheritance she has obtained from the estate directly caused her miserable marriage. And just as the lawns have darkened, so too has her spirit been dimmed by the prolonged influence her husband. But as Goodwood approaches her, frightening her with his desire "to see [her] alone," Isabel perceives "a feeling of danger" (486). "Twilight seemed to darken around them," as Isabel notices an environmental change accompanying this ominous tonal shift (486). She acknowledges the subjectivity of her observation, qualifying her perception as something which "seemed" to occur. The reader knows that Isabel, who is well-read, would be prone to color her perception of the world with a pathetic fallacy like this. As Goodwood evokes a feeling of fear in her, he speaks with a voice of darkness as much as a "voice in the darkness" (486).

Yet, as if balancing the darkness that shades this conversation, a moment of startling light overwhelms Isabel. The reader can imagine a sizzling flame when Goodwood "flared almost into anger" as he expresses his desire to save her from her marriage (*Portrait* 487). Each word sparks like a luminary in the night, drawing Isabel's gaze and attention to his conversation. In one moment, Isabel questions him and the shocking qualities of his ideas:

> "[t]o think of 'you'?" Isabel said, standing before him in the dusk. The idea of which she had caught a glimpse a few moments before now loomed large. She threw back her head a little; she stared at it as if it had been a comet in the sky. (488)

She still stands in the darkness of "dusk" yet notices that Goodwood offers ideas that burst like miniature epiphanies within her head. Isabel considers his words not as stars or the moon, both of which are known for navigational constancy, but rather as a comet, far more ephemeral yet also more brilliantly dazzling. The repeated motive of darkness — both of Isabel's mind and the atmosphere — being punctuated by bright lights of conversations, phrases, and epiphanies mirrors the realization Isabel has during her vigil.

These moments of light figure the mental and physical effects that accompany Goodwood's speech and Isabel's internal epiphanies. As he implores her to run away with him, she remarks that the reason why she will return to Gilbert Osmond is:

> "[t]o get away from *you*!" … But this expressed only a little of what she felt. The rest was that she had never been loved before. This was the hot wind of the desert. (*Portrait* 488)

While Isabel begins this moment by answering Goodwood and stressing her dislike of him, she concludes it with a realization. She realizes that, despite all her fairy-tale dreams, she "had never been loved before" (488). In retrospect, neither

her husband nor any suitor who had pursued her had actually loved her. In her unbalancing moment of epiphany, she not only visualizes light, but feels it — the "hot wind of the desert" heated by the bright daytime sun (488). Her epiphany transcends the space of her mind, and its emotional impact physically affects her. The physical effect accompanying the epiphany highlights the physical reality of Goodwood's presence and his physical desire for her. The epiphany which feels like "hot wind" becomes, for a moment, the winds of change, temporarily seducing her with whispers of the passion that could blaze between them. For a moment, she believes that Goodwood could offer her salvation. So overcome by this dawning realization,

> she believed just then that to let him take her in his arms would be the next best thing to her dying. This belief, for a moment, was a kind of rapture. (489)

Here, she interprets the light of his words as a momentary "rapture," if not a salvific force and a moral good (489). For a moment, Isabel considers Goodwood's promise of love to be powerful enough to overcome the darkness of her own life, even the darkness of Osmond's invasive influence. He offers her the promise of a dawning future, but James reveals this momentary epiphany to be a willful oversimplification on Isabel's part.

When Goodwood makes his physical approach, James reveals the dangerous power of light; again he reiterates the power of darkness to bring about epiphanies. The conversation between Goodwood and Isabel ends and:

> [h]e glared at her a moment through the dusk, and the next instant she felt his arms about her and his lips on her own lips. His kiss was like white lightning, a flash that spread, and spread again, and stayed; and it was extraordinarily as if, while she took it, she felt each thing in his hard manhood that least pleased her … by this act of possession. (*Portrait* 489)

In this strange twilight that lacks natural sources of light, a "flash" of "white lightning," like the wrath of an ancient god, terrifies Isabel. Like the comet to which she had previously compared him, lightning is an irregular and evanescent light source that appears as both a marvel and a danger. And the kiss's resemblance to "lightning" recalls the French phrase, *coup de foudre*, the metaphorical lightning bolt of love at first sight. However, the effect of this lightning kiss inspires fear rather than love. She is entrapped by this light, transfixed proverbially like a deer immobilized by the blinding glare of headlights. She rejects her suitor, as definitively as James rejects romantic convention in the story's conclusion and Isabel chooses to remain in an abusive marriage. Interestingly, she clarifies that "when darkness returned she was free" (489). This is perhaps because Isabel is not in true darkness; she establishes repeatedly that she is in "dusk," not night. Dusk, full of shadows, occupies the darkly indeterminate middle ground between day and night. One cannot yet see the stars, but the sun has already set. Likewise, Isabel is uncertain and confused, stuck between the darkness of her life with Osmond and the aberrant light that shines from Goodwood's promises. In a moment in which she considers herself shipwrecked, "wrecked and under water," she looks for a guiding light to lead

her out of this twilight (489). She notices that the familiar windows of Gardencourt gleam like beacons, like a lighthouse directing lost ships to safe harbor. "She then runs toward the house," guided by "lights in the windows of the house; they shone far across the lawn" (489). Just like a ship seeking port, "she moved through the darkness" in order to reach the safety of Gardencourt (498). Ultimately, lights provide safety from the darkness and guide her, saving her from the irregular distraction with which the flashes of lightning and comets dazzle her. But before she can reach this saving light, the return of darkness makes her "free." In this moment of darkness between Goodwood's lightning and Gardencourt's windows, she realizes that she will not find a future with Goodwood.

James' unusual artistic choice to render epiphanies through darkness exemplifies his tendency to subvert literary tropes and expectations in his novels. In these various epiphanies, he reveals that the contrast of darkness and light, both metaphorical and literal, grants his heroines insights into their lives. As if acknowledging that the luminescent gleam of brightness has an aesthetic and insincere connotation, James relies on darkness to induce realizations. In both Catherine's vigil and Isabel's nighttime epiphanies, darkness reveals the truth about the men that they had considered brilliant, but who desired to use them merely to magnify their "brightness" and impress the "popular voice." Just as staring into the sun for too long can be blinding, the presence of abusive yet bright men has prevented these two heroines from seeing the truth. However, the darkness of quiet rooms provides the remedy for blinded eyes. Only in the absence of obscuring light, can the truly deceptive nature of "brightness" be seen, and epiphanies be achieved. Within these scenes, James establishes a modern world in which photography becomes the primary vehicle of capturing portraits of two unique ladies and their unconventionally unromantic stories.

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